

# Marketing Success: How to Get (Free) Publicity for Your Practice

BY ALLAN WALKER

The successful practice of medicine in today's challenging health care environment requires the effective use of marketing techniques and tools. If you want more patients to pass through your reception area—or maintain those you already have—it is important to educate them on who you are and what you have to offer. Perhaps the most cost effective way to accomplish that is to maximize free publicity opportunities.

As unfair as it may seem, the fact that a relatively small number of sources receive an inordinate amount of (free) publicity is a common phenomenon in today's highly competitive, fast-paced world of newsgathering. It is no accident that journalists repeatedly choose to return to trusted and known sources. When a harried editor or news director demands a story “yesterday” or challenges his staff to “come up with a feature idea,” the quickest and easiest course of action a journalist can take is to turn to a short list of tried and true sources.

How does one become a local media expert? Do you simply contact the various media sources in your area and ask to be placed on the “expert” list? While it is not quite that simple, it is not that difficult either. Following the action steps below will help increase your chances of being contacted by local media when they need health care-related answers.

**Research Your Media Market:** What media cover health care issues in your market? Compile a list of the media in your coverage area you consider important. Make sure your list includes newspapers, television and radio stations, business journals, Web sites, and other local outlets that may provide even minimal business and health care/lifestyle coverage. Pay particular attention to newspapers and business journals as they are the most consistent source of publicity. In addition, be sure to identify metropolitan newspapers that have suburban inserts if they cover your specific area.

**Identify the Key Players:** Most media—especially newspapers and television—have people assigned to cover specific subject matter. You want to focus on members

of the press assigned to the medical, science, health care, or life/lifestyle beat. Identify these beat reporters and compile contact information for each. Radio (and even television to some extent) is a bit different; here you are looking to identify “personalities” who may have an interest in your specialty (i.e., talked on air about having a specific procedure). Note: Make sure you spell contact names correctly. Rule No. 1 of journalism is to “spell names right.” Similarly, journalists do not like to receive mail/press releases with their name misspelled.

**Study the Media:** Not all media want the same information. Study each media to determine what types of news they distribute. For example, the print/online media (newspapers, business journals, Web sites, etc.) usually run a wide variety of news items including in-depth features, personality profiles, new procedure and technology articles, as well as location moves,

staff additions, continuing education achievements, etc. Most print media have regular “in brief” or “business people in the news” columns where they include people and staff-related news items. Television and radio are more “personality” oriented, although television news stations generally do a good job featuring health-related news because of high viewer interest. Television and radio offer better publicity opportunities based on providing a service to one of the personalities. Not only might you receive immediate on-air publicity, you might receive ongoing publicity whenever the subject comes up and the personality relates his/her experience.

**Understand What's News ... and What's Not:** More important than understanding what the public wants, is understanding what the media wants. It is the media that makes the decision to publish a news item, not the public. Not everything you or your practice does will be considered newsworthy. While it may be important to you or your staff, some activities do not rank high on the “that's news” meter. The best way to understand what a specific media considers news is to study what they currently distribute. Follow the media for a period of time

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# How to Get (Free) Publicity for Your Practice

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and record or clip/save what they use. Look around your practice for similar news items ... and contact the appropriate media sources. Be proactive. The media is busy; they do not know that you moved or added the latest procedure to your service offerings. Tell them ... in a professional way. Remember, the media love news that is unique and exciting: Are you the first? Are you the biggest? Does it involve a celebrity? A worthy cause? Things that are out of the ordinary make news.

**Create a Professional Press Release:** Creating a simple, compelling press release (i.e., one that results in publication or inspires a contact) is not all that difficult. Most popular word processing programs (i.e., Word, WordPerfect, etc.) include press release templates that look great. More challenging is writing the release. The No. 1 rule is to be thorough. Provide all the facts and details, but keep adjectives to a minimum. If the release eventually turns into a major feature (hallelujah!), the media representative will likely call for an interview and fill in the details; however, it is perfectly fine to include a brief paragraph explaining the importance of the event, item, etc. (the media may not really know how important it is). Tip: Always include detailed contact information in a press release, including: contact name, telephone and facsimile number, e-mail address, etc.

**Establish Yourself as an Expert:** Your rise to local health care fame will likely include several strategic steps:

- Make the local media aware of your existence and your credentials. You can accomplish this with the help of a “fact sheet,” a one-page document similar to a curriculum vitae or resume that details your personal and practice history. Including a fact sheet with all press releases (especially in the beginning) consistently establishes and reinforces you and your area(s) of expertise. Also, when an in-depth feature is in progress, the reporter, etc., will not need to ask all the mundane background and credentialing questions; everyone can cut right to the heart of the matter. It also serves to confirm spellings of names, procedures, etc.

- Regularly contact the press with newsworthy items. This serves three purposes: 1) it keeps you in front of the media; 2) it shows you know what is news; and 3) it results in the publicity you seek.

- Advertise with the media. Although it is not mandatory to spend money with the media you are courting,

it definitely does not hurt. Many editors will find story inspiration in advertisements (i.e., “I see where Dr. Starr is advertising that new procedure. It looks interesting. Let’s do a story on it” ... and contact Dr. Starr). However, never expect coverage based on advertising expenditures; that is not how the legitimate press operates.

- Become known in you community. Join a variety of local civic, youth, volunteer, and charitable organizations. It never hurts for the press to hear your name connected with these leadership groups.

- Project a national reputation in your field. You can accomplish this with your fact sheet, highlighting your education, medical background, memberships in state and national professional organizations, and with a short list of published works and speaking engagements.

**Cultivate a Professional Relationship:** Get to know the people behind the media. Develop a professional relationship with them. Your goal is to have the press trust you and look to you for timely, accurate, and independent health care information and insight. Once they know you, they will be much more likely to contact you when they need something. When submitting a press release (remember to include your fact sheet), take a moment to include a handwritten, personalized note offering the recipient your expertise should he/she need assistance on health care issues. Highlight your specific areas of expertise on the fact sheet. In addition, you can offer to review materials should such a need arise. As always, make sure detailed contact information is included.

**Be Deadline Sensitive:** Members of the press are frequently on deadline. You must be accessible and deadline sensitive if your want to be “their” expert. When contacted by the media for your thoughts, comments, expertise, etc., it is imperative to respond in a timely manner. While the press will not expect you to leave surgery to take a call, they will expect you to respect the time-sensitive nature of their business. Return all calls from the press as quickly as possible.

## **Bottom-line Impact**

Any comprehensive practice marketing plan should include discussion on how to identify and maximize free publicity opportunities. While free publicity efforts should never replace well-designed paid advertising campaigns, they can produce meaningful results that directly impact the bottom line.

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*For more information, contact BSM Consulting at 1-800-832-0609.*